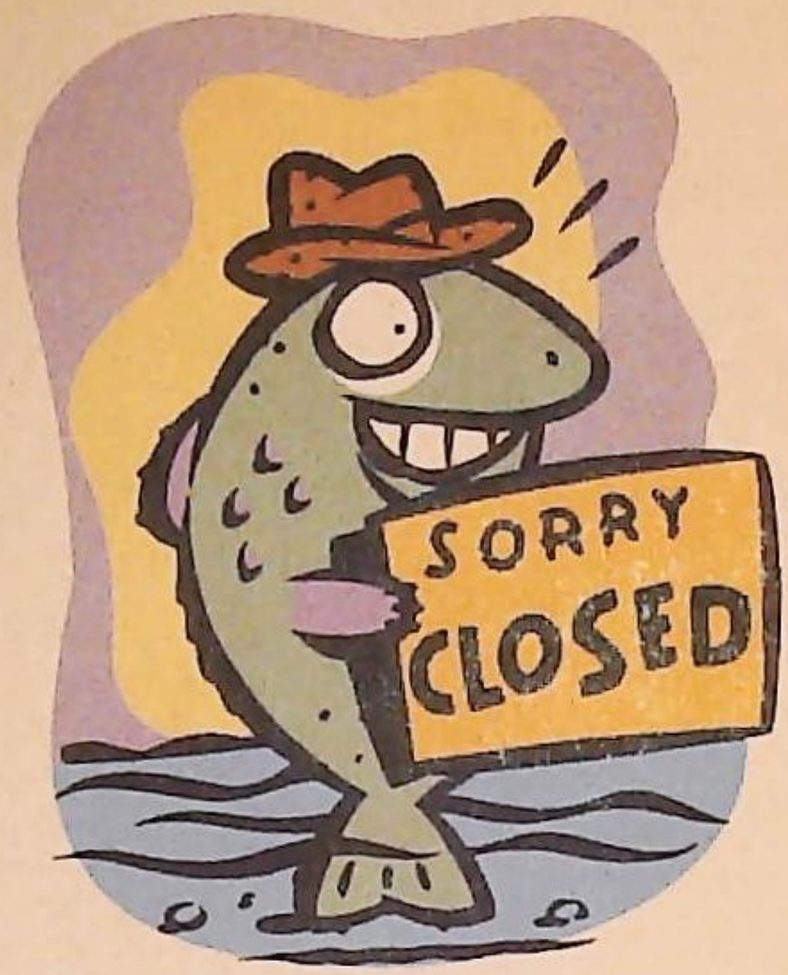
Each year in Pennsylvania, over 45,000 miles of stream and sixty-nine lakes are stocked with more than 2 million legal-sized trout.

PENNSYLVANIA PONDERS A FISHING POLICY REVISION

BASS RULE CHANGES *considered*



PENNSYLVANIA FISH AND BOAT COMMISSION (PFBC) OFFICIALS ARE considering changing the state's bass regulations—which are currently written to protect spawning largemouths and smallmouths—to accommodate fishermen.

Currently, anglers may not fish for bass from the opening day of trout season until mid-June, or from April 15 to June 16 in 1995. The intent of the closed bass season has been to encourage the fish to reproduce.

However, the closed season's effects have always been ambiguous, biologists say, and the closure certainly inconveniences many panfish and trout fishermen. Those anglers must try not to catch bass, even though largemouths and smallmouths occupy many of the same waters and incidental catches are common.

One regulatory solution that works for trout, closing certain trout waters to all fishing, isn't practical for black bass. "We certainly don't want to close down the Susquehanna River for that entire period of time," says PFBC's media relations chief Dan Tredinnick.

INSTEAD, AUTHORITIES BEGAN POLLING SPORTSMEN'S GROUPS AND fisheries biologists last summer about mechanisms that would protect bass, but at the same time ease the state's enforcement burden. One proposal is to shorten the existing open season on bass. Under this rule, creeling bass would be illegal after September 30, but catch-and-release would be permitted for the balance of the year.

One problem with this proposal is bass tournaments. Many tourneys are held early in April, before the season closes, as well as in October and early November. And a ban on possession would halve a season that is already abbreviated. Also, organized bass fishermen support a closed season.

"I think the present regulations are working as they are," says Joseph Nordon, past president of the American Bass Association of Eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey. "A closed season is better than catch-and-release because that's going to disturb the spawn, and I can't see disturbing the fish at that time of year."

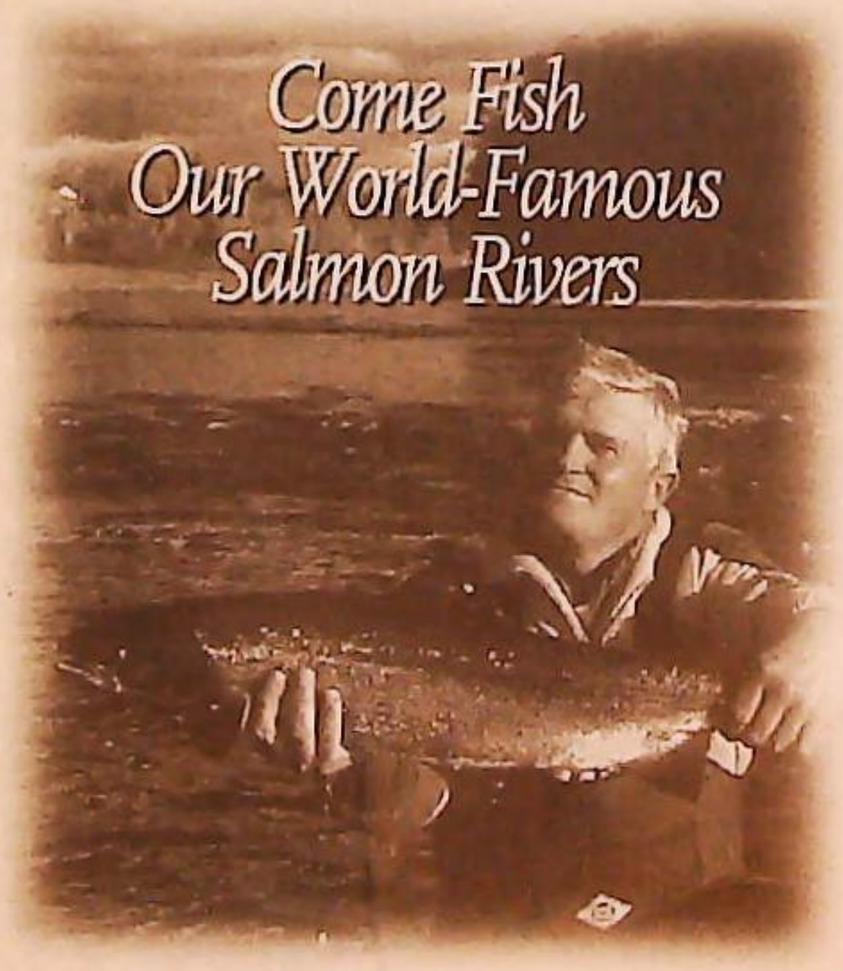
Another group that would oppose the shortened legal season is ice fishermen. "You don't sit on a bucket on the ice to practice catch-and-release," notes Tredinnick.

Another tactic officials could opt for is issuing different regulations for different waters, but that option increases, not decreases, the number of regulations statewide.

If Pennsylvania were to change its bass regulations, new rules wouldn't take effect before 1996 at the earliest. Authorities would also be required to hold public hearings on any new rules. Recognizing that bass fishermen are as vocal as they are numerous, one fisheries official says, "We're treading very lightly on this."

—TIMOTHY MIDDLETON

CARTOON BY HARRY CAMPBELL



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Of the 3,000 snake species worldwide, only about 300 are poisonous. In the U.S., 3,000 to 4,000 snakebites occur annually, but only two to fifteen people die each year from snake venom. By contrast, about 1,000 people die of bee or wasp stings.

ACCORDING TO EVIDENCE, THE CATS ARE BACK

northeastern COUGARS

A NEW HAMPSHIRE-based cougar-preservation group says that despite many game professionals' doubts, a growing body of evidence suggests the big cats are indeed living and breeding in the wilds of New England.

Ted Reed, the founder and president of The Friends of the Eastern Panther, says evidence that the Eastern cougar has survived in remnant populations in New Brunswick, Canada, and eastern Maine is "overwhelming," and the animals are expanding into other East Region states as well.

"The evidence exists throughout this century that the panther was never totally extirpated from the region," he said. "With the rejuvenation of the Northeast's forests and deer populations, more and more of the animals are becoming widespread."

The Eastern cougar is protected as an endangered species throughout the Northeast, and many officials privately say that it is extirpated from the region. However, several recent incidents suggest the cougar naysayers may be wrong.

Following up on a sighting of three cougars reported on April 2, 1994, Vermont Fish and Wildlife biologist Cedric Alexander inspected a videotape of tracks and examined scat that had been collected from the area of the sighting. To confirm that a cougar had indeed left the feces, he sent the droppings to the National Fish and Wildlife Forensics Laboratory in Ashland, Oregon. Last September, the lab confirmed the presence of cougar hairs in the scat.

Numerous sightings suggest cougars are breeding in New England.

"In addition," said Alexander, "we had a reputable report in May 1992 of two long-tailed, basset hound–sized kittens within a mile of the April sighting, and another report of an adult and two smaller cougars in August 1993 within 10 miles.

"Because we now have hard evidence of cougars' existence in the wild, the possibility exists that there is an established population, yet there is no way of saying for sure. In addition, their origin is unknown, and we cannot determine if they are of the original Eastern cougar subspecies."

OTHER EAST REGION states have received numerous cougar reports as well. Maine wildlife authorities have investigated a report of a bobcat/cougar encounter, and in Massachusetts, biologist Mike Ciborowski of the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife says there are probably one or more cougars in the Quabbin area.

Vermont's Alexander notes that cougars, which can weigh up to 200 pounds, are normally very elusive and will avoid people. To report cougar sightings, contact The Friends of the Eastern Panther, Dept. FS, P.O. Box 102, Exeter, NH 03833, or your state game agency.
—TOM FULLER

COUGAR ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN RICE. WOODCOCK BY MICHAEL McCURDY

BOWFIN CAUGHT:

● Keene, New Hampshire, angler Ken R. L'Abbe caught an 8-pound 13-ounce bowfin from Wilson Pond in Swanzey on August 28, 1994. It was the first bowfin ever taken in New Hampshire.

Don Miller, a fisheries biologist with the state Fish and Game Department, theorized that the 28-inch fish came from the Connecticut River by way of the Ashuelot River, into which Wilson Pond drains. Because the bowfin's conspicuous eyespot on the base of the tail was missing, biologists believe that the fish was a female.

"So, if there was a male around Wilson Pond, we may have a reproducing population," Miller said.
—TOM FULLER

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

A new sixty-four-page softcover book—On Water, On Wings, In The Woods—is being sold by the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife. The book describes sixty-two places in Maine where you can see various wild birds and mammals in their natural habitat.

Most of the listed sites are on public land, and each site is described in detail, including species that might be seen, how to get to each site, the best times to visit, availability of restrooms and other facilities, and information on access for persons with disabilities.

To order the book, send a check or money order for $5.95 (made payable to Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife) to Watchable Wildlife, Dept. FS, Station 41, Augusta, ME 04333. —TOM FULLER

fanged FACT:

● Rhode Island and Maine are two of only four states in the country that harbor no venomous snakes, and they are the only states which once harbored poisonous species, but no longer do. Maine's population of timber rattlesnakes, which was confined to the southwestern corner of the state, was extirpated in the 19th century. Rhode Island's last timber rattler was killed by a state trooper in 1969. The other two states without vipers: Hawaii and Alaska, which have never been home to poisonous snakes. —TOM FULLER

wet. We did have heavy rain the night before. I did describe the feet as being bigger than the book said, probably because they impressed me so much.

Even with the few differences between my report above and what the book describes, I have no doubt in my mind that I saw a mountain lion (felis concolor).

The Madison Panther

During the early evening on June 18, 1991, William Jones and his wife Olive of Silver Lake, New Hampshire were driving in Madison, New Hampshire a little bit north of the intersection of East Madison Road and Lead Mine Road. This area is just south of the southeastern section of the White Mountains National Forest. Suddenly they saw a large cat in the middle of the road directly in front of them about fifty yards distant. It was apparent to Mr. and Mrs. Jones that the cat had come up to the road from a pond flooded back from a beaver dam. The panther crossed the road and then disappeared into a rocky and ledgy area. Mr. and Mrs. Jones describe the animal as tan to blonde in color, with the shape of the head and ears unmistakably cat-like, the animal had a long tail and a shoulder height of approximately two feet. Mr. Jones is a life long hunter and outdoorsman and there is no doubt in his mind that for five to ten seconds he was observing a panther. Mr. Jones reported this encounter to the NH Fish and Game Dept. on the next day. He assumed that the dept. would immediately investigate. At a later date he was very disappointed to find that because of other matters they considered more important they had failed to investigate at all. Mr. Jones believes that because the cat had come up from the edge of a beaver pond there was an excellent chance that fresh tracks could have been found. Mr. Jones also reports that several people in the general area around Madison have seen an animal that fits the same description, but had no idea of what the animal might be and were reluctant to report it for fear of being laughed at. These other sightings have occurred over a period of several years. FOTEP believes that Mr. and Mrs. Jones have give an accurate description of an Eastern Panther and that their report is highly credible.

Jay's Track

Some Thoughts on the Road-Kill Question

During our Winter 1991 panther campaign through New Brunswick and New England, Ted Reed and I were frequently asked why there has never been a road-killed panther in the Northeast. This issue, indeed the recurrent lack of hard evidence to support so many otherwise reliable panther reports, weighs heavy in the minds of many skeptics and continues to frustrate those already convinced of the ghost cat's existence.

First of all, as I pointed out in my initial column, "The Eastern Panther and the Burden of Proof," much evidence to support the continued existence of the puma in the Northeast does exist, especially if one puts forth the effort to thoroughly and objectively delve into the subject and review it.

Regarding road-killings specifically, it is my feeling that there have in fact been more than a few. Unfortunately the carcasses to prove this have never been collected. In his 1972 book, *The Eastern Panther: A Question of Survival,* for example, Bruce Wright describes at least 2 credible instances of automobiles colliding with panthers, 1 in Mass and 1 in Nova Scotia. In neither case was the animal ever collected, nor its ultimate fate ever known, for each was able to leave the roadside before the driver or other investigators returned. How many other similar cases have gone unreported we will never know.

At the heart of the road-kill issue are 4 points which need to be made:

1: Most of us are probably familiar with Florida's Alligator Alley, Interstate 75, and the much-publicized incidence of road-killed and injured panthers which plagues it. Many of us tend to envision this same highway-puma-dead puma scenario for cougars everywhere. This is incorrect, for the Florida situation is an isolated, extremely unusual phenomenon.

Its uniqueness stems from the fact that the majority of Florida's panthers inhabit what can be compared to Central Park in the midst of New York City. And not only is the "city" - south Florida in this case - extremely busy, but its "park" - actually a cluster of 3, Big Cypress, Everglades, and Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve - is as well. This translates into incredibly high and, because of the limited road system, concentrated volumes of traffic pouring through the small remaining pocket of panther habitat. Faced with social and personal pressures like dispersal, reproduction, or the need to eat, panthers are simply forced to cross I-75 regularly. Some inevitably are hit.

That this is atypical is shown in the west where even in areas of both a saturated cougar population and heavy tourism, such as around Yellowstone or Glacier National parks, there is a very low incidence of car-cougar deaths. Interestingly, having realized an acute problem exists, Florida has recently begun installing a series of tunnels - panther paths - along I-75 in hopes that its pumas, indeed all wildlife, will have a safer existence along the highway corridor.

Jay's Track — Continued

2. Felis concolor is a creature of tremendous strength. Capable of felling prey 8 or 9 times its own weight, built rugged and durable for high-impact attacks, arguably the cougar pound for pound is the most powerful of all the cats. With this in mind it is apparent that even if struck by a car, the chances of a cougar being killed outright are not extremely high.

Points 1 and 2 are borne out by my own experience, again in the west, where in 7 years of wildlife work in prime cougar habitat from Arizona to Montana I heard of only 4 cougars being hit by vehicles. All 4 were on major US highways at night and all 4 were hit by cars or small trucks traveling 30-60 mph. Of these cats, 2 limped off the road mortally wounded and had to be shot by game wardens. The other 2 were apparently uninjured - or at least able to make it to "the bush" and escape. One of these latter cats even lost some fur to the front bumper of the car!

This brings me to point 3, a general comment regarding road-kills. Predators make up a small percentage of the carcasses one sees lying alongside roads and highways. I know; for the last 7 years I have kept track of road-kills from 1 end of the country to the other.

Now, we all know that predators are the least common animals in the environment, far outnumbered by the creatures they themselves prey upon. Arguably then, predators may sustain road-related mortality in proportion to their occurrence in nature, which explains their low membership in the carrion club of our highways and byways. It is my feeling, however, that despite their relative natural scarcity, predators are still less apt to fall victim to vehicles and therefore occur in the roadside sample disproportionately to what we would expect.

Whether this is due to greater intelligence or strength, or keener instincts among predators than other groups of animals I do not know. I suspect it relates to all 3. Whatever the reason, their disproportionately low occurrence as road-kills has great implications to our panther mystery. For, where panthers occur, extremely uncommon, extremely low-density, the most uncommon predator of all, then the chance of 1 being struck by a car is fortunately very slim. Couple this with the durability of the beast discussed above and we see that the chance of a panther being both hit and immediately killed, rather than dragging itself into the woods to hide and die, is again not very likely.

We are talking probabilities here, so while we are at it we might as well get on with the fourth and final point. If a panther is killed on the road and for whatever reason the driver fails to investigate or realize he has just killed one of North America's rarest creatures, how likely is it that someone coming along later will see, recognize, stop, and collect what remains of the animal?

Though I have no firm data on this I can tell you from experience that it is not very likely. Most of us travel through life with a terrible case of tunnel vision, low-grade inquisitiveness, and basic apathy. Believe me, even when a person is sincerely interested in the ghost cat and is diligently studying road-kills as he passes, when zipping down the interstate at 65 mph on vacation or heading to his next job or appointment it is very difficult to overcome the urge simply to write that bloated, tawny brown pile of blood and gore off as a deer and force himself to pull off - or harder yet, turn around at the next exit - and investigate.

For all these reasons, the chance that an Eastern Panther will ever be brought forth as a road-kill is slight. Note I did not say impossible, for it is my feeling that within the next 5 years one will turn up and the circumstances surrounding it will be such that it will be difficult for anyone to dismiss the specimen as a former captive.

Incidentally, some of the same logic used in the arguments above can be used to explain why in recent decades no hunter has ever come forth with a bagged panther. Realize, first of all, that because of its durability a clean kill of even a treed cougar is a difficult thing to make. If we consider the chance of a hunter not only seeing a panther, but of finding it in a tree where he can aim and shoot at leisure, or getting a fleeting glimpse when his gun is loaded and he is prepared to shoot, we get an idea of the low probabilities we are dealing with. Even then the hunter will have to get off a shot that causes instantaneous death or he is liable to lose the specimen.

Wright's 1972 book describes several anecdotes of hunters taking potshots at panthers which then managed to get away - most likely only to die a slow death later. The only instance which comes to mind of the rare clean kill was that of 1932 when 2 bullets from Havelock Robertson's .303 Lee-Enfield ended the life of a panther in Kent County, New Brunswick. The photograph of this cat, case-skinned, appears both in Wright's book and in a 1953 article by the same author in the Canadian Field Naturalist.

Now, having said all this, allow me to mention in closing that a panther specimen, reputedly shot by a hunter in New Brunswick in 1949 or 1951, surfaced during our recent talk tour through the province. At the time of this writing (February 1991) the history of this cat, now mounted, is being confirmed by Mr. Adrianne Charette, the man responsible for locating it. If this mounted puma proves to be of New Brunswick origin it will be the most recent confirmed specimen of the rare Eastern Panther in existence.